

**An Evaluation of the Advanced Higher Hub:
The Learner Perspective**

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1. Introduction

This report summarises the outcomes of a research study which sought to examine the experiences of former pupils of Glasgow Caledonian University's (GCU's) Advanced Higher Hub (the 'Hub') in terms of their transition to Higher Education (HE). In-depth one-to-one interviews were carried out with a total of 30 former Advanced Higher pupils who had progressed to university. The focus of the research and of this report is the learner perspective of studying HE level qualifications (Advanced Highers) within a university environment. The report begins with a description of the aims and objectives of the research project. A brief overview of the policy context is then provided in terms of reasons for the development of the Hub. The study's methodology is outlined before key findings are described by thematic area. The project findings are discussed with reference to the theoretical perspective of capability approach and conclusions are drawn in terms of the policy implications for delivering HE level qualifications within a university environment prior to entry and the subsequent impact on transitions. Exemplar quotes from participants are included in Appendix 1.

Aim:

- To examine the transitional experiences of former Advanced Higher Hub pupils who have made the transition to Higher Education

Objectives were to examine:

- To what extent the Advance Higher Hub provides fair access to pupils from schools in disadvantaged areas;
- To what extent the experience of studying Advanced Highers within a university setting helps to prepare pupils for the successful transition to Higher Education;
- What skills are obtained in the study of Advanced Highers within a university setting and what is the subsequent impact on transition and progression;
- Academic progress at university;
- Does the immersion within one Higher Education institution whilst still at school provide transferrable skills for any university?
- In what ways does the immersion in Higher Education for the study of Advanced Highers contribute to a learner identity?

2. Policy and context

Despite recent attempts to widen participation to HE, figures show that 18-year olds from Scotland's 20% *least* deprived communities are more than four times as likely to enter university as those from the 20% *most* deprived communities (Commission on Widening Access, 2016). In Scotland, transition to Higher Education (HE) has therefore taken on a new prominence and is linked largely to the movement into university of the most disadvantaged students: represented in the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. Providing fair access to Advanced Higher qualifications is central objective of the Scottish Government's policy, recently outlined in, 'A Blueprint for Fairness' which makes a number of recommendations to support the achievement of the key target that by 2030, 20% of entrants to higher education must come from the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland (Commission on Widening Access, 2016).

Pupils in Scotland can go to university at the end of the fifth year of secondary school as Highers provide the entry requirements for Scottish universities where degree are normally four years long. However, recently it is more common for students to remain until sixth year taking further Highers at around 17-18 years of age. The majority of English universities, the most popular choice for students wishing to study outside of Scotland, require Advanced Higher qualifications as these are deemed by the English universities to be most similar to A levels. In addition, while Highers remain the 'gold standard' for university entry in Scotland, increasingly Advanced Highers, where studied, are becoming a condition of entry and, in some cases, can lead to direct entry to year 2 of a degree. Many schools, particularly in Glasgow, struggle to provide a range of Advanced Higher courses to their final year pupils for a variety of reasons including small pupil numbers, timetabling constraints and lack of teacher expertise or resources. Pupils often then repeat Highers or take classes that are not directly related to their choice of post-school destination, in order to fill their timetable. Thus, sixth year pupils from secondary schools in Glasgow which fall within the two lowest quintiles of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation are targeted for inclusion in the Advanced Higher Hub. The current average Higher Education progression rate for pupils in these schools is 19%, whereas the Scottish sector average for state funded secondary schools is 37% and for Glasgow City Council is 29% (Scottish Funding Council, 2013). Established

in 2013, the Hub is a partnership with Glasgow City Council and the Scottish Funding Council. S6 pupils spend up to 18 per week within the university learning environment and are afforded associate student status with access to the full range of facilities. The Hub offers Advanced Higher subjects: English, Mathematics, Chemistry, Biology, Modern Studies, Business Management, History and Physics to between 100 to 160 sixth year pupils each academic year.

Performance data

Advanced Higher Hub	Year 1 2013-14	Year 2 2014-15	Year 3 2015-16	Year 4 2016-17
Partner schools	18	20	28	28
Pupils completing	97/104 (93%)	138/153 (90%)	139/151 (91%)	105/117 (90%)
Pass rate (all AH subjects)	74%	90%	91%	92%
Pass rates, A,B,C	A: 23% B: 31% C: 20%	A: 40% B: 30% C: 20%	A: 41% B: 34% C: 16%	A: 34% B:34% C:24%
Pass rate Scotland (for same seven* subjects combined)	77.6%	78%	80.9%	79%
Pass rate Scotland (all AH subjects)	81%	81%	81.7%	80%

*In Year 4 Physics was made available for the first time bringing the total number of subjects on offer to 8.

With the exception of Year 1 of the development, the pass rate at the Hub has surpassed both the national pass rate for all Advanced Highers combined and the national pass rate for the same seven subjects combined.

3. Methodology

A qualitative methodological approach was adopted. Data about the destinations of all former Advanced Higher Hub pupils is not known as a robust tracking system is not in place due to

the inherent difficulties of following pupils from one institution to another (from school to college or university). Therefore, participants were self-selecting from a list provided by the Centre's staff of former pupils about whom destinations were known. To this extent the sample could be described as a 'convenience sample'. This has implications in terms of the generalisability of the findings since, for example, pupils who did not progress to university post the intervention and pupils who progressed to college are not included in the sample.

Data collection followed standard ethical procedures of voluntary participation, freedom to withdraw from the study at any time, confidentiality and anonymity. At the time of volunteering, participants were informed of how their contribution would be used in the data analysis and resultant publications. No participant names were recorded on the research instrument, thus ensuring anonymity. The Hub Manager acted as a gatekeeper in terms of contact with former Centre pupils. In-depth one-to-one semi-structured interviews were undertaken with a total of 30 university students who had undertaken Advanced Highers as part of the programme. Questions, which were open-ended, covered a range of areas in relation to the students' experiences of studying at the Hub and their subsequent experiences of the transition to and through university. Interviews were transcribed and a 6 phase thematic analysis of the data was undertaken to identify key themes across the dataset which related to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved: familiarisation with the data set; generating initial codes to identify a feature of the data and collating the data by code; searching for themes; reviewing and refining themes; defining and naming themes, counting the number of respondents who mentioned and provided evidence for each theme and writing up the analysis by theme with reference to the research questions. Specifically, an inductive or 'bottom up' analytic approach to thematic analysis was used whereby analysis was guided by the themes that emerged from the data, rather than by prior theoretical accounts.

Nineteen female and 11 male students were interviewed. In terms of level of study, most interviewees were first year students (16) while 9 were second year students and 5 were third year students. Participants were engaged in a range of different degree programmes at a total of 8 universities U.K. wide although most were based in Scotland and the majority were attending Glasgow based institutions. Degree discipline areas studies included: Social sciences (5), Arts (4), Law (4), Engineering (4), Bio-medical sciences (3), Pharmacy (3), Medicine (2), Social work (2), Mathematics (1), Optometry (1), and Dentistry (1).

Table 1. Provides an overview of the study sample.

Table 1: Overview of Study Sample

Overview of Study Sample	
Number of case studies/students interviewed	30
%MD40	87%*
%MD20	67%*
Female students	19
Male students	11
Year of university study	1 st year: 16 2 nd year: 9 3 rd year: 5
Advanced Higher Subjects studied	Business Management; Biology; Chemistry; English; History; Mathematics; Modern Studies. Higher Politics**
Pattern of study at Hub	1 x Advanced Higher (17) 2 x Advanced Higher (11) 3 x Advanced Higher (2) 12 participants completed Advanced Highers at school and at the Hub simultaneously
Degree discipline areas studies included:	Social sciences: 5 Arts: 4 Law: 4 Engineering: 4 Bio-medical sciences: 3 Pharmacy: 3 Medicine: 2 Social work: 2 Mathematics: 1 Optometry: 1 Dentistry: 1
First generation to attend university***	20 (70%)*

*It should be noted that these figures refer to the study cohort of 30 participants and are not necessarily reflective of all Hub participants

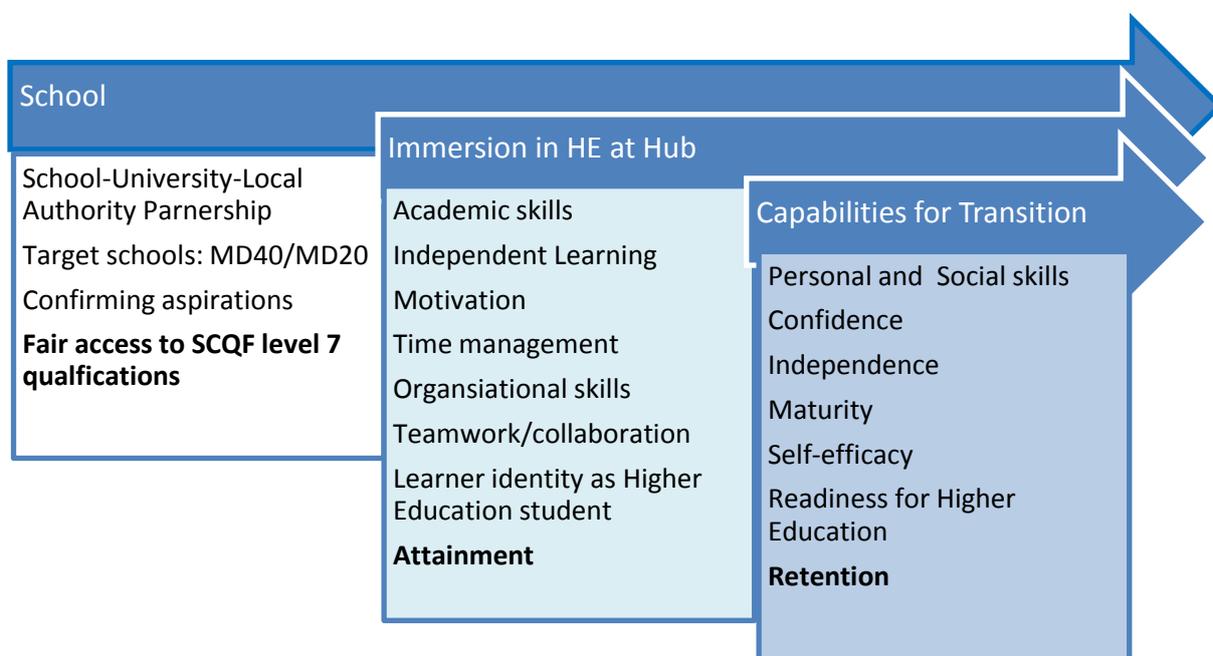
**Higher Politics was available to those students who were studying Advanced Higher Modern Studies only

***Defined as: neither parent attended university

4. Findings

Data from interviews with 30 former Hub pupils who have made the transition to university demonstrates that the Hub provides an immersive HE experience which facilitates the development of key capabilities for the transition to Higher Education. Fig. 1. Summarise the findings from the learner perspective.

Fig. 1. Capabilities for transition to Higher Education fostered via the Hub



4.1 Fair access to SCQF level 7 qualifications for pupils from schools in disadvantaged areas

In terms of the study sample of 30, the Hub meets the Commission on Widening Access's recommendation that key stakeholders, should ensure the key transitions phases around SCQF levels 6 to 8 are better used to provide students from disadvantaged backgrounds with the qualifications and experiences required to support fair access. Evidence of this is demonstrated by the fact that:

- 87% of the study sample came from the two lowest quintiles (MD40) of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation while 67% came from the lowest quintile (MD20);
- 70% of participants were the first generation to attend university.

4.2 Reasons for attending the Hub

Participants were asked about their reasons for attending the Advanced Higher Hub. Reasons included:

- For all participants their respective schools could not provide the Advanced Higher(s) they were interested in studying;
- All participants had already decided, prior to attending the Hub, that a university degree programme was their aim;
- All participants reported that the Hub helped them to confirm their aspirations for Higher Education;
- The use of Advanced Highers for entry to HE was variable among the study cohort;
- Some students (N=7) were studying Advanced Highers because the subjects were either encouraged or required at that level for university entry for their chosen degree courses: medicine, dentistry and universities in England or abroad;
- All participants had entered their university course at SCQF level 7 /first year.

4.3 Learning and teaching

An analysis of the interview data which drew on the themes of learning and teaching found that:

- Participants reported that Advanced Highers were fully timetabled at the Hub and totally focussed at the appropriate level which was not always the case for participants who were simultaneously studying Advanced Highers in school;
- For those participants who had completed Advanced Highers at school and at the Hub simultaneously (N=12) teaching at the Hub was reported to be different from the teaching of the Advanced Highers in target schools with more emphasis on independent learning and preparation ahead of classes and more interaction and discussion within classes;
- Teaching at the Hub was often described as being more like tutorials than school classes;

- Participants reported more use of on-line learning at the Hub;
- The teaching of Mathematics, in particular, was cited by several participants as being more like university learning and teaching (N=10). The ‘flipped classroom’ approach meant that pupils were expected to complete work ahead of the teaching of a topic. This approach was said to foster independent learning, motivation and self-discipline.

4.4 Academic skills

Participants reported a range of academic skills developed through the study of Advanced Highers at the Hub including:

- Research skills: information gathering; note-taking; research methods;
- Critical analysis skills: critical thinking; presenting an argument; problem solving;
- Academic writing skills: essay and report writing; lab reports; dissertation; referencing;
- Other skills: handling scientific equipment; public speaking; presentation skills; exam skills; communication; online learning.

4.5 Independent learning capabilities

In response to a question about how the university learning experience was different to that which participants were used to, 21 interviewees (70% of the sample) mentioned developing as independent learners. Those participants who listed independent learning as a feature which contributed to their overall experience at the Hub wished to stress this as a key factor which fostered feelings of studenthood and which helped their transition to university. Participants were very clear that this is what makes the distinction between Higher and Advanced Higher level study and is something which is a prerequisite for university study. The experience of independent learning, for example, helped law students to prepare for university work by way of researching material to present a case in a moot court. Students reported having developed the following independent learning capabilities:

- Motivation
- Self-Regulated learning
- Time Management
- Organisational Skills
- Study Planning
- Teamwork/Collaboration

4.6 Personal and social capabilities

Increased confidence was the most reported personal outcome (N=30, 100%) of studying Advanced Higher(s) within a university environment followed by increased independence (N=25, 83%) and motivation (N=13, 43%). Over and above feeling confident with the level of work required for university study, the increase in confidence was attributed to the social side of the Hub and in particular meeting new people. This was especially the case for those former Hub pupils who had attended the Hub from a school on their own. Others who attended in small groups from the same school reported immediately being split into groups with people from different schools for group discussions and being paired with new people for laboratory work. The experience of having to make new friends in this way was considered a forerunner for meeting new people at university.

Five participants reported increased feelings of self-efficacy and acceptance from early on in their experience at the Hub. Being around other like-minded people was said to contribute to this especially being around others who wanted to learn and for whom learning was important.

Social skills were highlighted by all 30 (100%) participants. These were reported as being fostered via interaction with new people. Examples included working in groups or in pairs with new people which helped to develop confidence in speaking and presenting ideas and arguments in front of others. These social skills were deemed of relevance for meeting new people at university and in particular, for those moving away from home to attend university, for making friends in shared accommodation. Friendships developed at the Hub at times carried on beyond the studying of Advanced Highers and into university regardless of which universities participants attended.

4.7 An enriched educational experience

Learners reported that the university environment facilitated a sense of belonging and contributed to a sense of identity as a student. Evidence that undertaking HE level qualifications while still at school was enriched by the environment of the university is apparent from participants' descriptions of factors which added to the over experience:

- Having full use of the university facilities including the Students' Association, cafes and the gym as well as being able to join societies and clubs;
- The opportunity to occasionally sit on lectures;
- The university facilities and resources, in particular the library and the science laboratories;
- Being issued with a student card and being able to use this in shops;
- Not having to wear school uniform;
- Less formal relationship with staff;
- Being treated like adults.

4.8 Supporting the transition to Higher Education

Participants were asked to what extent and in what way(s) their experience at the Hub help prepare them for university. Findings included:

- All participants (N=30) agreed that studying Advanced Highers had helped to prepare them for their respective degree courses at university;
- All participants (N=30) reported that the university facilities and resources added to the student experience and preparation for university, in particular the university library;
- All those participants who had studied science subjects (N=12) reported that the resources and facilities in the science laboratories enhanced their learning experience;
- All participants (N=30) reported that transition to university would have been different without the Hub experience – many described the prospect of the transition to university without the Hub experience as being more of a 'step', 'jump' or 'leap';

- Those students who had progressed to institutions other than the host institution reported that the Hub experience helped to prepare them for transition to any university;
- For participants, obtaining the academic skills normally associated with the Advanced Higher qualification, on their own, were insufficient to aid the progression to university in a significant way;
- Key factors influencing the preparation for the transition to university include the development of independent learning and personal and social skills which were fostered through the immersive experience in university.

4.9 Higher Education learner identity

Participants were asked to reflect on when they started to feel like a university ‘student’ as opposed to a school ‘pupil’. For the majority of participants this intellectual transition took place at the Hub:

- 87% of participants reported that the transition from school ‘pupil’ to university ‘student’ started at the Hub;
- Factors contributing to a Higher Education learner identity include: travelling to and from school or home to university; not having to wear uniform; delivery which is more akin to tutorials; being treated as adults, as students, with respect; allowed more responsibility; associate student status and student cards; meeting new people; being surrounded by like-minded people; mingling with current students; interaction with university facilities and resources and becoming an independent learner.

4.10 Academic progress at university

Participants were asked to comment on their academic progress at university to date¹. An analysis of self-reported accounts of progress for all 30 students found that:

- Participants had progressed well in terms of self-reported academic performance with some impressive results. With two exceptions, both of whom had had a ‘blip’ or ‘setback’

¹ It should be noted that information provided here is self-reported and has not been verified by the relevant academic institutions.

in one subject only, all remaining participants (N=28) reported having passed all their exams to date and none had changed course or repeated a year;

- Many participants put their current satisfactory academic progress down to the academic skills, independent learning and personal and social capabilities developed at the Hub.

The experience of studying HE level qualifications within a university environment was summed up by one current student as follows:

“What it gave me which I wouldn’t otherwise have had was a feeling of, ‘I can do this. I can go to another institution where I don’t know anyone and I’ll be able to mix and be able to find my way round. I’ll be able to negotiate my way round the library and find what I need. I know the learning styles. I have all the necessary skills. I’m organised. I can do the research. I can write to the appropriate level academically. I can talk. I can present and I know I can do it because I’ve done it already’.”

5. Conclusions and recommendations

A key message for the sector emerging from literature is the importance of moving beyond pre-entry and the first year experience to embed transition support activity within a longitudinal student lifecycle model. Milburn’s lifecycle model, which advocates that transitional support should start pre-school and extend to graduation and beyond, locates transitions in four key phases: ‘getting ready to get in’, ‘getting in’, ‘staying in’, and ‘moving beyond’ Higher Education. The model developed at the Hub provides an example of an intervention which addresses ‘getting ready to get in’ and ‘getting in’ to Higher Education.

The experience of studying Higher Education level qualifications within a university environment whilst still at school had a significant positive impact on the transitional experiences of participants. While the study is relatively small and generalisations from such a sample size should be cautioned, evidence from this study clearly indicates that the experience of studying HE level qualifications within a university setting provides learners from schools in disadvantaged areas, many of whom are first in family to attend university,

with the academic skills and personal and social capabilities² for successful transition to Higher Education. The immersive model of transition delivered at the Hub develops independent learning, instils confidence, independence and motivation and fosters self-efficacy and maturity. The importance of developing engagement and belonging are recurrent themes in the literature on student transitions (Wayne et al, 2016). Both themes are evident in the impact on the student experience at the Hub.

Based on contemporary Higher Education research and practice, transition is most appropriately conceptualised as a process of identity development and change (O'Donnell et al, 2016, p.16). Furthermore, there exists a substantial body of work which underlines the importance of learner identity formation as this relates to transitions for learners who have no previous experience of Higher Education (Bowl, 2001; Archer & Leathwood, 2003; Leese, 2010; Field and Morgan-Klein, 2010). Where possible, therefore, transitional support should have as its focus the development of a learner identity as an HE student. The study of Advanced Highers at the Hub makes pupils' on campus experiences more relevant to their academic aspirations and helps to prepare them for their transition to Higher Education. Moreover, the experience encourages a Higher Education learner identity which, for learners from disadvantaged communities, may be essential for progression, retention and completion. The study's findings have implications for practitioners and policy makers in terms of the benefits of delivering qualifications that are traditionally but not necessarily available in school, within an HE environment. Further expansion of this model should be considered as one way of widening participation and building skills which support such students to successfully transition into and through Higher Education.

² The importance of the development of capabilities for Higher Education is highlighted in a growing literature from commentators such as Walker (2006) Hedge and MacKenzie (2012) and Wilson-Strydom (2015). Drawing on the work of Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2003, 2011), the capability approach offers an alternative to human capital theory and emphasises social justice as a core value in Higher Education.

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Appendix 1

Exemplar quotes from participants by theme, former Advanced Higher Hub pupils who have progressed to university

Reasons for participation in the Advanced Higher Hub

“I knew I wanted to do something medical related, probably medicine but maybe dentistry. So I knew I needed Advanced Highers to get in and those ones I needed (Chemistry and Biology) were not on offer at my school.”

I knew that it would be good to have an Advanced Higher Maths for engineering. At my school only two people wanted to do the Advanced Higher and the school couldn't offer it due to these small numbers.”

“From a young age I knew that I wanted to be either a doctor or a vet. Due to teacher shortages and lack of resources, our school could not offer me the Advanced Highers I needed for medicine or veterinary medicine so I came to the Hub.”

“I wanted to apply to do Law to universities in England that generally would require 3 Advanced Highers. I was doing English & Maths at school but my school didn't run an Advanced Higher Modern Studies class.”

Skills for university

Research skills

“I learned how to reference essays which I do in my course constantly. And of course the skills involved in working to deadlines and completing work without persistent supervision. It prepared me for performing these skills at university, making doing it less alien.”

“In terms of academia, the research and critical thinking skills that were developed at the Hub have stood me in good stead in my University career in law.”

“At the Hub I was able to practice writing to a more complex degree and also write a dissertation. The dissertation was very useful in terms of moving on to university as it is encouraging to know that the one I will complete in my 4th year will not be my first attempt – unlike some, I've had practice!”

Critical Analysis

“Definitely research and critical thinking. Research is critical for all University work as it is all about learning and discovering as much as you can that is relevant to your work and then critical thinking is important in order to understand what research is relevant and how to apply it to the task on hand, in your own understanding.”

Academic writing

“Learning how to use the library; we were taught referencing which wasn’t really taught in the Highers. This has made me very confident when I now have to reference my university work.”

“Referencing, carrying out investigations, doing and writing up experiments. The skills we developed particularly in writing up investigations were really helpful as we hadn’t done this at school. The university labs are quite different from school labs so getting university lab experience was invaluable. The lab skills are transferrable.”

Laboratory/science skills

“The lab experience is very ‘hands on’. You get your own work station but are also encouraged to work on pairs and groups. The lab resources are amazing. You get to do so much more like even from the basics of learning lab health and safety to using new equipment such as air vents and I even made aspirin!”

“The lab skills I think are the most significant. In both sciences we had fantastic resources. We used fume cupboards in Chemistry which we had at school but didn’t have access to. I cultured bacteria in Biology using amazing equipment. Now when I’m in a lab I know how to use the equipment.”

Presentation skills

“I participated in a competition with my Modern Studies teacher and other Hub students that involved creating an application with short speech-based videos. This improved my interpersonal and presentation skills.”

“Learning how to use a university library and finding articles online. Experience with proper lab equipment was invaluable as well as writing a lab report. Doing group poster presentations helps with confidence.”

Online learning

“Using the library, using the online learning environment, which is different to the one used at Glasgow Uni but still provided good experience, and even just getting used to the crowds and the different environment was extremely helpful.”

Communication skills

“I think the Hub helped with my communication skills and my confidence significantly. My confidence grew because I was pushed out of my comfort zone and had to work with people from different backgrounds/schools, unlike in school where we had been working with the same people for 5 years. If I hadn’t had this

experience I would have struggled a lot more to make friends/ meet people at university and so I might not have the support group of friends that I have now. My communication skills have helped in university. I would have struggled more in tutorials to contribute effectively if I had not developed my communication skills at the Hub.”

Independent Learning capabilities

“There was much more independent learning. I found that I was pushed into taking control of my own learning. I found being at the Hub simultaneously more laid back than school but also more serious, though I suppose the latter was really my own anxiousness to make the most of my learning. Travelling to university helped in making me aware of commuting and travelling alone, whereas I normally had friends to travel with when I went to school. This probably seems insignificant but suddenly not being surrounded by friends was definitely a bit scary and lonely at first.”

“It gives you the university aspect, the independent learning. It’s a kind of ‘in between’ school and university.”

“I improved my studying skills significantly due to the workload expected in Advanced Higher. I can keep up with the pace of work at university as it was similar to that of Advanced Higher.”

“Independent learning, managing your own studying. It’s a good introduction to first year. They say that first year isn’t hard but actually it is so you need to be prepared.”

Motivation

“The time management and self-motivation required to work independently was the major thing for me. My subject has little, but quite full-on, contact time so you need to prepare and do a lot of independent work.”

“The whole experience just made me feel motivated to put the effort in and get to uni.”

Time management

“The Hub was a tremendous help with dealing with the change from school to university: it acted like a bridge. Firstly, it made me have a taste of what GCU was like (which gave me confidence when I started university). It helped me manage my time, both for travelling and studying. The Hub increased my independence and responsibilities.”

“Time management, responsibility, socialisation (meeting new people from the different schools), independence. Going to university you become completely responsible for your studies, I can say that the Hub has definitely been a help with this.”

Confidence

“The Hub really helped me develop my confidence and put me outside my comfort zone. I was able to gain practical experience in building new relationships with people who I had never met before which was paramount in preparing me for university.”

“It made me feel more confident about moving away for university.”

“I’m more confident doing presentations now because I’ve had the practice. I’m able to articulate my points well because I’m prepared instead of just rushing through something. I aim to make my presentations interesting now.”

“Confidence – we were immediately paired up or chucked into groups where they split us up so that we weren’t with anyone from our school. That experience means you become less nervous meeting new people at university.”

“Confidence and increased self-worth: confidence to make friends with strangers after years of having the same friends through school.”

Independence

“I can’t emphasise enough the sense of independence it gives you. It’s like a trial run of uni.”

“Getting to know a whole host of brand new people and meeting people who were happy to talk about more intellectual stuff such as politics really helped when getting to meet people. Also the independence given at the Hub was a great bridge between school and university.”

“Doing Advanced Highers at the Hub gives you independence and the self-discipline to learn. If you have this discipline already then you are given the trust to use it and to develop it; if you don’t have it you acquire it there. And this is an essential skill for Higher Education.”

Maturity

“I got to experience the teaching staff-to-student dynamic which is different to school; it’s more friendly and adult.”

“It’s made me feel more independent, confident and mature. We were treated more like adults, more like students, we weren’t spoon fed, and there was just an expectation to study on your own.”

“Developing the skills to deal with adult teachers. It’s a more informal relationship. They don’t tell you what to do although they’ll help and guide you. We used their first names whereas at school you had to always use the teachers’ last names.”

Self-efficacy

“The main thing is that suddenly you're in this environment and you're meeting all these new people who are like-minded and it's like, ‘Oh you like Maths too? That's cool, that's good.’ This had never happened to me before. Students are smart, right? So I think this is the key thing, you're not going to feel like a student if you don't feel smart and you're not going to feel smart unless it's ok to be smart. The Hub gives you that environment. It's the Hub's vital ingredient.”

Social skills

“It's mostly the social aspect, meeting new folk from different schools; being thrown immediately into labs where we had to work in pairs or in groups with completely new people. We were encouraged to share what we were doing in the lab and to discuss our findings. We were encouraged to help each other out.”

“Meeting new people gives you social confidence.”

Teaching at the Advanced Higher Hub

“You had to go away and source materials, do your own reading and come up with a presentation for the group which was followed by a discussion. In that way it's much the same as a tutorial.”

“In maths where we got the slides before the class and were expected to have gone over these ourselves and do the work before we actually came into class – this is much more like university. It fosters self-discipline and independent learning which I needed as I had to be motivated to learn as I didn't need the qualifications for university entry. It has served me well here.”

How the transition to university might have been different

“I've no idea what I'd be doing now were it not for the opportunity the Hub gave me to do Advanced Highers in science subjects. I certainly wouldn't be doing dentistry – some kind of college course maybe, I don't know. So it wouldn't just have been different it would have been impossible for me to do what I wanted.”

“I would have been extremely unprepared for university if it wasn't for the Hub. I lacked confidence and I feel that had I had to learn how to use the new facilities as well and having to manage the work load then I would not have thrived in the same ways as I did in first year. I also feel that the length of my classes at the Advanced Higher Hub were reflected later in my education. I was able to train myself to keep alert and focused for longer periods of time.”

“I think that the level of work and commitment required at university is a big jump from that at school and the Hub was definitely a good stepping stone for this. I think it enabled me to feel more prepared with the workload.”

“I think I’d have been a lot more nervous and unsure of what to expect. The Hub has really helped with that. I feel I’d have been worried about things like using the library, printers and finding my way around. ”

“It made things much easier being at the Hub – just everything and I mean everything. The campus in general – it’s as if we’ve been here for an extra year. I felt more comfortable entering first year than I would have done otherwise, especially coming to the same uni with the same folk.”

“I wouldn’t have felt as prepared and I would have had much less confidence, especially when it comes to meeting new people and being in a university lab situation.”

“It would have been more difficult to have such a high level of independence that is required for university.”

“It would probably have been more difficult. You need to be prepared to be an independent learner.”

“I think it would have been more of a jump for me, as I think experiences, such as interacting with new people and self-regulating, are invaluable to have had before university. I would have been more uncomfortable in the first few months than I was.”

“I would have thought the leap was too big from being very independent about my learning compared to school also I think I would be more nervous in an environment where you don’t know anybody because I didn’t know anybody when I started at the Hub.”

“It would have been much more difficult. It’s basically a wee bridge to university.”

“I feel that I would have had a hard time coming out of my shell, as well as being more self-reliant. A class of 20 doesn’t really compare with a lecture hall of 100+ students but I think that the Hub prepared me for the life of home study.”

If I hadn’t had the experience at the Hub of having to meet new people and work with people from different schools/backgrounds, I think I would have found it much more difficult to engage with the new people I was meeting and make friends at university.”

“The new biology material; the lab work; group presentations; making new friends. Everything would have been more daunting if I hadn’t already had those experiences at the Hub.”

“The Hub should be rolled out to anyone who wants it. Although a lot of people do get the chance to do it many others don’t and have to settle for doing more Highers or doing an Advanced Higher at another school. Many people I know would have loved to have had the same opportunity and when I tell them about it they want to know more and think they would have benefited from it. Students on my course who only did Highers have missed out on a lot, especially things like referencing and dissertations and learning how to use a university library. It’s all new for them and it makes it a bigger jump.”

Learner identity as 'student'

When participants made the intellectual transition from pupil to student:

“As soon as I arrived on campus. I thought, ‘This is good, this is different.’ We could address the teachers using first name terms; you are made to feel welcome; you want to be there and they treat you like adults. You are trusted to study and to complete pieces of work. There’s also more leeway so that, for example, if you have missed a deadline but you are nearly there with the work and there’s a good reason for being a bit late with it they are more accepting of this than the teachers are at school where it’s immediately a negative thing and you’re punished. Not having to turn up in uniform also helped. I had a four hour gap between leaving school and starting at the Hub so I went home to get changed first.”

“When Rebecca Lavery [Head of Advanced Higher Hub] said something like, ‘I know you’re all mature people; you are students and your time is valuable so I won’t take up too much of it to explain ...’”

“The culture in the Advanced Higher Hub was extremely different to that of my school and so I felt like a student very early on. We were given student cards and had all of the privileges of the other students at GCU. We also called the teaching staff by their first names, took breaks in between classes and were not confined to one area. We also had more in depth discussions in class and didn’t have to ask to use the bathroom. All of these things contributed to the feeling of being a student as being treated and respected as such, as young adults.”

“Right from the start. I loved escaping from school and getting to travel on my own and not in uniform. Had I not come to the Hub I'd have been like, ‘I'm still in school’, in my mind. But I had my offer and I just had to sit the exams. When I started at the Hub it felt like I was leaving school already. It was a different world full of smart, like-minded people who liked maths and were into their sciences like me. The Hub is a wee bridge.”

“It started at the Hub. When you’re at the Hub you’re a kind of hybrid of a pupil and a student because you’re still taking classes at school. So it started at the Hub and developed as I started at university.”

“I first felt like I student when I was in the Hub class and realised that in university they won't be anyone there to check up on you and push you do your work.”

“It’s the independent learning that makes you feel like a student plus the more adult, less formal relationship you learn to develop with the staff.”

“At the very first break we had at the Hub on day one when I found myself in a situation surrounded by new faces and I knew I wanted to get to know them all. This is the first time you get to meet new people not from your own school. Then we got our student cards –that really helped you to feel like a student.”

“Fairly early on at the Hub; whenever we were able to come in without uniform. You felt you could blend in more that way and be part of the culture. Also having the student card and being able to get discounts in shops and not having to use your Young Scot card like people still at school. It makes you feel like you’re a student already.”

“From when I started at the Hub. We got a student card. You’re officially a student when you have a student card.” GCU student

“Probably when I started using the university library to study in. Having a university student card, email address and login for the computers made me feel like a student.”

“During my time at the Hub – near the beginning. It was to do with student cards, not having to wear a uniform, being able to study in the library amongst other students.”

“At the Hub - what makes the difference is the whole idea that you’re not essentially spoon fed information anymore. There is a lot more thinking for yourself. I am not saying I didn’t think for myself in school, because I did, but there is a clear difference.”

“At the Hub: I felt more like an adult, not babied as much. It was good knowing that we were responsible for our own learning. What contributed to this was not being singled out by wearing uniforms on campus and having access to uni library and resources.”

“Probably when I was working on my dissertation for Modern Studies. I think it was the independence associated with the task and the detail involved in creating a 5,000-word dissertation. It was a task that exceeded anything we had ever had to do before and was significantly independent –being a student brings independence. It was a huge task and one which definitely contributed to my feeling more like a student than a pupil.”

“Fairly early on at the Hub, maybe Christmas. It’s about the learning environment. The jump for me came at the Hub because the learning was different and I was with people who actually wanted to learn. This was what I’d wanted. The Modern Studies teacher was really interesting and engaging and we all wanted to listen, to discuss, to engage. And the different, more independent learning made you feel different from school where the focus is on passing exams. My Modern Studies dissertation was all my own knowledge gathering and research.”

Preparation for any Higher Education institution

For non-GCU students, in terms of feeling prepared for the transition to university, did it matter that you were going to a different institution i.e. not GCU?

“No, the way the two universities work doesn’t seem much different to me.”

“No, because the general expectations of university are the same no matter where you go.”

“I don’t think so. I knew I would be moving to a different city so it could have been anywhere really.”

“Yes because I was moving away from home but no because I understood how university worked.”

“No, all universities are similar; they have similar processes, the same teaching and learning environment. They look different outside but they’re essentially the same inside.”

“No not really. I got a feel for the atmosphere of university which was most important. Lots of things elsewhere are similar: the library, the resources; the labs and equipment and so on.”

For GCU students only, would you have felt as prepared for the transition to university had you gone to another university?

“I’m not too sure, I believe that already knowing GCU through the Hub was a significant factor in the acclimatisation process and I believe that that’s a big part of transitioning to University.”

“Yes, the Hub definitely prepared me for the transition to university - it developed a lot of my skills required for university. It is true that it was easier to become a GCU student than to go to another uni, but simply because the Hub introduced me to the GCU building. Other than being confident with the university building, the Hub prepared me to go to any university.”

“I think I would have still been pretty prepared, I’d have still had experience using a university library and would still have had access to university systems. I’d imagine each university would be very similar although not identical.”

“I feel that a lot of the skills that I gain as a result of studying at the Advanced Higher Hub are transferable however studying at this university feels all the more comfortable.”

Academic progress at university

“I’m doing well, currently in my 3rd year, so this year and next, decide my degree classification. Based on my Trimester A results for this year, I’m sitting at a 2:1.”

“I am happy with the grades I am achieving at university. It is very stressful and understanding some content can take a very long time however when you receive an A or B back from your essays/reports it is very encouraging. I am glad to say I have passed every piece of coursework I have done at university and I hope my grades continue to get improve.”

“I am progressing well. I feel comfortable in my environment and have found writing essays independently easier as I have progressed. Everything passed so far.”

“I have been doing well so far getting a first in one set of exams and a mid 2.1 in the other.”

“I’ve been improving year on year, and have been getting mostly A’s this year. I am yet to fail anything luckily!”

“Were it not for the fact that I had done the Advanced Higher Maths I wouldn’t have sailed through first year.”

In terms of the transition from school to university, if you could sum up your experience of attending the Hub in one word what word would you use?

Confidence (x7); Independence (x4); Worthwhile(x2); Engaging; Excellent; Life-changing; Extremely helpful; Opportunity; Preparation; Unexpected; Beneficial; Fantastic; Invaluable; Challenging; Enlightening; Educationally enhancing; Smooth; Unique; Peace of mind – for starting uni; Sad but Good – sad because it was like a chapter closing on school and good because it was great to meet new people.